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Catalogues That Offer Help With Giving Rather Than Buying

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It's the start of the begging . . . er . . . giving season again.

You can probably tell. Your mailbox is stuffed with solicitations from various charities. The airwaves are filled with pleas from this or that group, asking you to donate your clunker in return for a tax deduction.

So how do you tell a good charity from a bad one? How do you find an organization that's doing good work in an area that interests you? And, with 22,000 nonprofits in the Washington area, where do you start?

Two annual holiday-season charity "catalogues" just out want to assist you. And this year, for the first time, they include Northern Virginia charities.

The slick Catalogue for Philanthropy made its first appearance last year, focusing on small, relatively unknown nonprofits in the District. Produced by the Harman Family Foundation, the catalogue highlighted 70 D.C. groups with budgets of less than \$2 million.

But this year, said founder and editor Barbara Harman, the catalogue expanded its scope. Among the 78 charities selected this year, 10 are from Northern Virginia.

Among those featured is Borromeo Housing, an Arlington County program for teenage mothers and their children.

The organization's staff of four struggles to keep the program going on a budget of \$200,000. It houses eight homeless teenage moms and their children for up to two years while the mothers go to school or work and take classes on such topics as parenting, job readiness and life skills training, said Allison Coles, Borromeo's part-time director of development.

The catalogue, she said, "is a wonderful opportunity, especially for a small nonprofit like ours. We're doing a lot on a small budget. . . . This is like Christmas."

Last year's Catalogue for Philanthropy raised \$466,000 for its charities, Harman said -- an average of \$972 per organization.

"We think that's pretty good" for a first-year effort, Harman said.

The Spirit of Giving Guide, published by the Community Foundation for the National Capital Region, is also in its second year. Last year, it also focused on small D.C. nonprofits -- all of them east of the Anacostia River.

This year, it has taken a different tack, focusing on nonprofits that work on issues around "civic engagement," said Kathy Whelpley, vice president of programs and donor engagement for the Community Foundation.

But only one of the 15 featured charities is from Northern Virginia -- the Tenants' and Workers' Support Committee of Alexandria. Another is from Maryland, and the remaining 13 are in the District.

"We tried to have it be balanced geographically," Whelpley said, "but the greatest percentage of groups doing this kind of work is in the city."

Last year's Giving Guide raised \$300,000 in cash and other contributions for the 15 charities included. Like the Catalogue for Philanthropy, 100 percent of those contributions went to the charities.

The Tenants' and Workers Committee hit the jackpot. By coincidence, it is included in both publications, which thrills its "grass-roots fundraiser," Elsa Riveros said.

"They know that organizations like us -- we need money," Riveros said.

The Catalogue for Philanthropy can be obtained at www.catalogueforphilanthropy.org . The Spirit of Giving Guide is at www.cfncr.org .

During a recent online chat about philanthropy at www.washingtonpost.com , I got a good question about the latest "Generosity Index," which purports to rank the charity of residents in all 50 states. Which states are more generous, my questioner asked, red (GOP) states or blue (Democrat) states?

The answer, for what it's worth, is that red states rank higher on this year's index. The most generous states are Mississippi, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Louisiana and Alabama.

And the stingiest? The blue states of Wisconsin, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Massachusetts and New Hampshire.